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Mr. Casey's successor

FOR all its secrecy, the Central Intelligence Agency has more often than not found itself in the public spotlight since its inception in the late 1940s. And that public scrutiny - whether by Congress, the Washington press corps, or outside observers - can only be welcomed in a society that values the rights of the individual and representative government.

The task facing Robert Gates, President Reagan's choice to replace William J. Casey as director of central intelligence, will be to reconcile an intelligence agency's legitimate role in a democratic society with the obligation to keep the public's elected representatives fully informed as to the agency's day-to-day policies and direction.

Mr. Gates, the agency's deputy director, who has been running the CIA since Mr. Casey stepped aside in December for health reasons, is a commendable choice for the top position. A 20-year career officer with the CIA, he is a Soviet specialist. He has served under Democratic and Republican Presidents. And his CIA service has been on the "analysis," as opposed to "operational" (covert), side of agency functions.

Congress will quite properly want to question Gates about his knowledge of the Iran-contra affair. So far, however, he is winning plaudits from congressional Democrats.

Outgoing director Casey, for his part, leaves an agency financially and internally

robust. No surprise here: Casey was a Reagan insider, and the President is a strong booster of the agency. CIA budgets have gone up. Covert operations (as in the mining of Nicaraguan harbors) have been encouraged.

That agency's very clout at the White House, however, is part of the challenge Gates faces. He must edge the CIA toward greater independence, while acknowledging Congress's oversight of the agency. The agency should be more forthright about its doings.

The CIA has generally taken its tackings on policy from the prevailing view at the White House. During the Carter years, for example, under former director Stansfield Turner, it played down covert operations and, as much as possible, stressed public openness. Under the more secrecy- and security-oriented Reagan White House, just the opposite has occurred.

In this regard, Gates's professional background should serve both him and the agency well. He brings no discernible ideological or political baggage with him. Thus, he need not even be a "caretaker" director. Lyndon Johnson appointed career intelligence officer Richard M. Helms to head up the agency in 1966. Helms was kept on in his post by Johnson's Republican successor, Richard Nixon. Given his credentials, Robert Gates may well be the person to continue the CIA's rebuilding.